



## Allergies

Just like people, cats can suffer from allergies. Allergies arise when a normally harmless substance is seen as a threat and the immune system responds inappropriately resulting in an allergic reaction.

Cats can be allergic to things in the environment (including fleas) or food. It can affect only their skin or it may affect their gastrointestinal and/or respiratory system as well. We use the following classification for cat allergies.

- **Food allergy**
- **Feline atopic syndrome** – allergies affecting their skin, respiratory and gastrointestinal systems.
- **Feline atopic skin syndrome** – allergies to things in the environment that only affects the skin.

Skin symptoms in cats with allergies may include scratching their head and neck, excessive licking (overgrooming), scabs, ulcers and swollen lips. Overgrooming in cats can be difficult to notice, you may just see bald areas on your cat.

Gastrointestinal signs may include diarrhoea, flatulence and vomiting.

Respiratory signs may include sneezing, wheezing and discharge from the eyes.

### Food allergies

Food allergies are common in cats and may present at any age. The most common foods responsible are beef, fish and poultry. Food allergies can be managed by changing your cat's food, but first a food allergy has to be diagnosed. Food allergy testing is available but is often inaccurate so the best way to determine if your cat's symptoms are due to a food allergy is to do a food trial. This involves feeding a hypoallergenic diet for 8-12 weeks. No other treats should be fed during this time, the only thing your pet should eat is the hypoallergenic diet. Suitable hydrolysed foods include Purina HA, Dechra specific allergy management plus or Hills ZD. If the original allergy symptoms disappear then we can assume a food allergy is present. In an ideal world we would reintroduce the original food and if the symptoms return that would confirm a food allergy, although this isn't always feasible.

### Flea allergies

Flea allergies in cats are very common. You don't need to see fleas on your cat for them to have a flea allergy. A single flea bite can cause reactions in a hypersensitive cat. Therefore, it is important to use regular flea control.

### Environmental allergies

The most common environmental allergies are to house dust mites, storage mites, pollens and grasses. Environmental allergies can usually be managed but not cured. Some form of lifelong treatment is required in order to control the itch and inflammation. Management is achieved by

- 1) Controlling exposure to what your cat is allergic to.
- 2) Therapy to control the immune reaction and therefore itch and inflammation.
- 3) Treating secondary infections

#### **Controlling Exposure to Allergens**

Completely avoiding exposure to substances your cat is allergic to, other than food, is almost impossible. However, reducing the exposure to certain allergens in the environment is possible and by doing so we can reduce the degree of dermatitis and in turn the amount of medication required.

- Dust mites are a common cause of allergies. If your cat is an outdoor cat continue to allow them access to the outdoors as the highest numbers of dust mites are indoors. Be aware that your bed often has the highest concentration of dust mites in the home! Wash your cats bedding weekly. A dehumidifier also reduces the amount of house dust mites.
- Storage mites are also a known allergen, they feed on flour, grains and seeds. Management of your cat's food can help reduce exposure. Empty the food from its original package and store in a resealable plastic container and discard the dust at the bottom of the packet. Keep the food in dry/cool conditions.
- If a pollen allergy is identified avoid cut flowers indoors.

### **Therapy to control the immune reaction, itch and inflammation**

- Immunotherapy- This involves identifying what your cat is allergic, usually by a blood test. A specific vaccine of what your cat is allergic to is then made. It works by gradually building up immunity/tolerance to the specific things your cat is allergic to. With this option you aren't just treating the itch, you are treating the root cause of the problem. Immunotherapy is very safe and is effective to some degree in the majority of cases. If the therapy works then immunotherapy injections are usually lifelong. For further information see the immunotherapy information sheet.
- Steroids- Very effective in controlling allergies in cats. There are potential side effects, although less commonly seen in cats compared to dogs. The side effects are reduced when given on an every other day or every third day basis, which is often achievable. Some of the side effects include drinking, peeing more and becoming hungrier than usual. Cats are also at risk of developing diabetes with long term steroid use. Most commonly steroids are given as a tablet or liquid, these are the safest most effective ways. A long-acting injection is available but side effects are more likely. Sometimes we use steroid sprays or creams directly on the skin.
- Atopica (cyclosporine)- Modifies the component of the immune system involved in the development of allergies. It is relatively safe over a long period of time but expensive. The main side effects are vomiting and diarrhoea in the initial period of starting this drug. In cats its important to check if they have been exposed to a parasite called toxoplasmosis. This can be done by taking a blood sample to look for antibodies. If the results are positive then it is safe to use the drug. If your cat is an indoor cat it is also safe to start this drug. The risk is in outdoor cats that haven't been exposed to this parasite as if they are on cyclosporin and catch the parasite they can become seriously ill.
- Essential Fatty Acids (EFA's)- Essential fatty acids can help in combination with the above drugs. They can improve coat condition and skin barrier function.

### **Secondary Infection**

Infection may be present in cats with allergies. The skin barrier in cats with allergies isn't as it should be allowing bacteria and/or yeast to flourish. It is important to treat any infections that may be present, alongside treating the allergy itself. Treatment may include wipes, foams, shampoos or tablets.

### **Beware of the Flare!**

In cats with allergies, we can expect flare ups from time to time, perfect control is rare. Think of the 80:80 rule, we aim to manage 80% of your cats symptoms 80% of the time. Causes of flare ups can include change in medication, exposure to a new allergen, stolen food and the time of year.